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PARIS FOR ZEYA; LONDON FOR TSOU

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TAGS: PGOV PREL SY LE

SUBJECT: TUENI ASSASSINATION PROVOKES SHOCK, DENIAL, AND A CLAIM OF RESPONSIBILITY IN SYRIA

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Stephen A. Seche, per 1.4 b,d.

¶1. (C) Summary: SARG officials condemned the December 12 assassination in Beirut of an-Nahar publisher Gibran Tueni, calling it an act of terrorism and insisting that enemies of Lebanon and Syria had committed the crime to further destabilize Lebanon and to worsen Syria's international position just as UNIIIC head Detlev Mehlis is set to release his second report. A SARG proxy speculated that the killing is designed to strengthen the arguments inside Lebanon for an international tribunal outside the region to try the suspects for former PM Hariri's killing. Human rights activists expressed outrage at the killing and seemed convinced that the SARG was involved in the assassination. The Internet website Elaph.com published a purported claim of responsibility for the Tueni assassination from a previously unknown group calling themselves the Strugglers for Greater Syria. End Summary.

¶2. (C) OFFICIAL SYRIAN REACTION: Syrian Minister of Information Mahdi Dakhllallah condemned the killing of Gibran Tueni as "a terrorist act." He added that the enemies of Lebanon "would not allow it to be stable" and attributed this destabilization to "foreign interference." Christian MP George Jabbour called the killing "a hideous crime," and said that "Lebanon and the Arabs have lost a brave voice." However, he urged Lebanese public opinion not to point fingers until there is a thorough investigation. Other official and quasi-official reactions, for example from the Syrian Journalists Association, offered similar condemnations. The Syrian news agency SANA also condemned the killing and quoted an unnamed official saying that enemies of Lebanon and Syria had committed the crime to undermine Lebanese stability and "to aggravate the situation against Syria" just before the release of the Mehlis report.

¶3. (C) Foreign policy analyst Dr. Imad Shueibi, a SARG proxy, told Polchief that the SARG was not involved in the killing, in his view. The assassination had been undertaken by elements in Lebanon who wanted to harm Syrian interests. When asked how the killing would accomplish that, Shueibi insisted that whoever killed Tueni wants to force a change in internal Lebanese politics. The objective is create a groundswell of support for a Lebanese government request that an international tribunal be formed outside the region to try suspects in the assassination of former PM Hariri. Many in the Shia community, and Hizballah, have refused to accept this idea, said Shueibi. That opposition had been strong enough until now to prevent any such GOL request. The killing of Tueni is designed to tamp down such opposition. Shueibi described the assassination of Tueni as another phase in the long campaign to harm Syria that began with the

killing of Hariri.

**14. (C) ENSURING A TRIBUNAL IS SET IN EUROPE:** Damascus-based al Hayat correspondent Ibrahim Hamidi told Polchief he had spoken with a range of SARG officials about the killing. Most expressed views, echoing Shueibi, that Tueni was killed by elements that wanted to entrap Syria in a further "internationalizing of the Lebanon issue" to ensure that any international tribunal would be formed and would be set in Europe (and not under the auspices of Arab League countries).

Hamidi predicted that the next target for assassination would be Walid Jumblatt. His killing would be used to further "internationalize" and bring pressure to bear on the issue of Hizballah disarmament, said Hamidi. Some SARG officials also told Hamidi that Syria's case in the UNSC following the release of the second Mehlis report would now be weakened, with allies like Russia and Algeria on the defensive, said Hamidi. Repeating exculpatory arguments heard after the assassination of Hariri, Hamidi noted that Syria more than any other potential party would be harmed by this assassination.

**15. (C) TUENI WIDELY HATED IN SYRIA:** Nonetheless, Hamidi noted that Tueni was widely hated in Syria, by officials and ordinary Syrians. He recounted an incident at his barbershops months ago when fellow Lebanese journalist Samir Kassir was killed. As Tueni was interviewed at the site of the bombing, Syrians in the barbershop commented acidly, "It was meant for you, Tueni."

**16. (C) CIVIL SOCIETY QUIETLY POINTS FINGER AT SARG:** Initial reaction among civil society activists here is one of shock. Human rights activist Anwar al-Bunni noted that news of the killing had paralyzed him and others emotionally. Bunni told

poloff he was convinced that the SARG had been involved in killing Tueni. Bunni noted that the killing, in tandem with the December 12 interview that President Bashar al-Asad gave to Russian TV, is a sign that the Syrian regime is willing to do anything to stay in power.

**17. (C) Activists Da'ad Musa and Wissam Tarif were similarly shocked and upset by news of the killing.** Tarif, a Lebanese national who resides in Syria, told Poloff he was planning to visit Lebanon immediately to check on the situation after the killing.

**18. (U) A CLAIM OF RESPONSIBILITY:** In the afternoon, the Internet website Elaph.com published a purported claim of responsibility for the Tueni assassination from a previously unknown group calling themselves the Strugglers for Greater Syria. The group is quoted as saying that it finally broke the pen of Tueni and "shut his mouth forever" and added that it would target any party that degrades those who defend the honor of Lebanon. Elaph said the claim was faxed in and that its authenticity could not be verified.

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